



State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

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State Superintendent

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

State Superintendent's Fall Conference for District Administrators

*By Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent of Public Instruction
September 19, 2001 • University of Wisconsin-Madison Memorial Union*

Again, I want to thank you for the great privilege of being able to join you here today as your new state superintendent.

In the April election, the people of Wisconsin sent a message, loud and clear, that they wanted a state superintendent of public instruction who was independent and who was accountable to them. I stand here today excited at the opportunity to work with you on behalf of the people of Wisconsin as chief advocate for our children and their education. I welcome this challenge, and I promise I will serve you well at this critical time when we must come together around our shared value and responsibility to put our children first.

Now, more than ever, we must unite as educators, so we can unite as a state behind education and our children. We know how futures are built. Futures are built in the hearts, minds, and souls of individual children learning how to use knowledge and creativity for the good of their community. Our children have now seen destruction through terror. They must see and participate in a future of creation through community.

So today, I ask you to join me and the people of Wisconsin in making a New Wisconsin Promise to continue in the progressive tradition of our great state. I ask you to make the commitment every day through your words and deeds with parents, teachers, and children; by reaching out every day to those who do not have children or grandchildren in the schools; and by dedicating ourselves to bringing our communities together around our stories of hope, so our future will be determined by the greatness of our schools and the goodness of our children.

The public school is the microcosm, the mirror, the heart and soul of American society. Those who work in the public schools have now been called upon to create schools where every child, regardless of the economic or educational level of their parents, has the opportunity for a quality education and a sense of hope in the fear and uncertainty around them.

To a child, one of the most obvious facts about grown-ups is that they have forgotten what it was like to be a child. But those of us in education are truly fortunate: we are constantly reminded of the joy of being a child. And now, more than ever before, we must ensure that our children are allowed to be children during this time of adversity.

At a time when so much seems out of our control, we can control the messages we send in our schools and the focus we provide on the joy of learning and academic achievement.

Our choice is not whether change will come, but rather how we will guide that change in the service of our promise to our children.

It is your voice I will bring to this office. It is your stories I will tell.

The success stories coming from Wisconsin public schools are great stories:

- Stories of shared responsibility.
- Stories of a public faith in community.
- Stories of a common commitment to opportunity for every child.
- Stories of hope that we are fortunate enough to witness every day.
- And the stories of what is at stake if we do not adequately invest in our public schools.

We must keep our schools strong for our students. We must keep our schools strong for our communities. We must keep our schools strong for democracy. Because that is what is at stake if it isn't done well. Our public schools can't turn their backs on any child. The diversity of needs represented in our schools is great and represents the larger society of our country and the world in which our children will live in the future. Those who work in the public schools are entrusted with the shaping of that future. We know that education can lead us to the future success and security of our country and citizenry.

The challenges are many:

- How the public schools of Wisconsin close the gap in achievement between children of poverty and their peers.
- How the public schools of Wisconsin ensure access to opportunity for every child.
- How the public schools of Wisconsin create secure learning communities where our children learn to value justice and their sense of humanity during talk of war all around them.
- How the public schools of Wisconsin continue the tradition of excellence that make our state great.

These are the challenges. The power to make this all come true rests with all of us.

United, working together, we can make this a state where we break down the greatest barriers to education, a state where hope is alive for every Wisconsin child to have a better life, a state where we make the commitment to lift the hope-filled hearts of our children up to their dreams.

Our common ground is our New Wisconsin Promise—to ensure the opportunity of a quality education for every child. Our New Wisconsin Promise raises us to the higher ground of common effort through community. We must continue to build on the record of success that you have helped create in Wisconsin. But we must do more. The time for action is now.

To meet the challenges of leadership, advocacy, and accountability for our public schools and libraries, I have organized the DPI around a collaborative legislative, political, educational, and communications structure, so we can effectively advocate for our schools.

I am using the office of the state superintendent as a loud and forceful bully pulpit to shape the political strength we will need to ensure that the right kinds of investments are made in education—smaller class sizes, early childhood learning opportunities, strong reading programs, special education, and quality teachers and administrators through PI 34.

I have brought to the DPI a highly qualified cabinet of individuals who have broad experience to work with the department's strong existing staff to deliver on our new agenda—to listen to and assist local school districts.

The time for action is now. My administration is committed to actively serving the children and school districts of our state by working collaboratively with you, the educational leaders of your communities, to ensure that Wisconsin students have the skills and tools they need to compete and win in the new, knowledge-based economy.

For too long, Wisconsinites have been told they must choose between investing in education and demanding accountability. This is a false choice. The people of Wisconsin believe we need to invest more in our children's education, and they're right. They also believe our schools must be held accountable, and they're right about that, too.

We all know that accountability without investments is a waste of time. When it comes to education in Wisconsin, we must invest more and continue to aim for higher achievement.

We must assure that schools have the resources to meet the challenges of an increasingly diverse student population with programs for English-language learners, including bilingual education, to close the achievement gap.

The state and federal government needs to be held accountable, too. We cannot expect our children to learn all they need to know in classrooms that are overcrowded, with teachers who are overburdened, and with textbooks and technology that are out-of-date. We need to invest in our schools and our children's futures.

We must ensure that children with disabilities have access to free, appropriate education, and that the doors to our public schools are not closed to children with special needs. Finally, we must ensure that the federal government lives up to its promise to communities to help them defray the expenses of educating children with special needs.

As educators, we understand that educational accountability consists of more than just producing good test-takers. The people of Wisconsin want the next generation to have the skills necessary to be productive citizens who contribute to their communities.

Any assessment system must be fully funded to live up to the high standards for accountability we have in Wisconsin. The governor has signed a budget that mandates a high school graduation test next year. I can **assure** you that I will continue to press the governor to get the answers and the funding we all need to implement a high school graduation test that lives up to the high standards of accountability we have in Wisconsin, or for him to be honest with us that it is not possible to fund this test.

As leaders in our communities, we must do all we can to encourage active parental involvement in our schools. After all, parents are a child's first and best teachers. A parent's job does not end when he or she drops the child off at the school's front door. Parents have a responsibility to actively participate in their children's education, to read to their children, and to help their children with homework. Schools need to do their part by welcoming parents into the education process and giving them a voice in the education of their children.

We need to treat teachers like professionals and pay them like professionals. We need to provide professional development, training, and support so all teachers can succeed.

New teachers should receive ongoing support and mentoring from their more experienced colleagues. Current teachers should receive continuing quality professional development to ensure that their skills and knowledge reflect the most up-to-date information and research. New teachers who answer the call to join this honorable profession should have the mentors and professional support they need to make the transition into teaching.

PI 34 holds the promise of uniting policy, theory, and practice to ensure professional teachers and administrators. We **must** fight for the funding of PI 34.

The people of Wisconsin understand—as we do—that reading is the fundamental skill that separates those who succeed from those who struggle. The new DPI Division for Reading and Student Achievement will coordinate assessment, Title I, bright beginnings, family-community partnerships, SAGE, and the Wisconsin Educational Opportunities Program, which includes urban education.

Everyone involved in the education system should be held accountable. Accountability means we will no longer tolerate mediocrity and no longer allow failure. Accountability applies to politicians, school

districts, schools, teachers, students, and parents. Everyone must do their part. No one can ignore their responsibility if we are to succeed.

As we embark on a new school year and a new educational partnership in Wisconsin, keep your heart filled with joy. If you love what you do, you will be loved for what you do. I am honored to have the opportunity to be with you today, and I look forward to working **for** and **with** all of you on behalf of the children of Wisconsin.

Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

As educational leaders, we can be that small, committed group that leads the way.

Thank you.